

Case Study from Germany: Immigrant Churches in the German Baptist Union

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In June 2006 the national office of statistics in Germany published the newest developments in the population of Germany. Normally the president of this national office refrains from any political comments, but faced with the numbers describing the immigrant situation in Germany he stressed the fact that Germany has really become a country of immigrants even if the politicians do not want to concede this development. Beneath 7.5 Mio. foreigners who live and work in Germany not having a German passport, the newest statistics count 8.5 Mio. "foreign" Germans who are of not-German origin, but have been nationalized detaining a German passport. Face to about 85 Mio. habitants, the 16 Mio. people of not-German origin living in Germany make about 20% of the population in Germany.

No wonder that this development of migration, which began in the 1960s with the immigration of Turkish and Italian guest workers, has had its effect on the situation of Baptist churches in Germany. Whereas the Turkish immigrants have not yet been reached with the Gospel¹ and whereas most Italians found their spiritual home in the German Roman-Catholic church, many other nationalities coming to Germany, as for example refugees, students, businessmen gathered in ethnic Christian communities, are becoming part of our German Baptist churches.

Since 1991 the German Baptist Union has taken a look at these developments and has delegated the monitoring and

mentoring of these groups and churches to the former Home mission department. Thanks to the engagement of the mission secretaries, the German Union can count a growing number of ethnic and international groups and churches in its midst. In 2005 we have in the German Union about 210 international Baptist churches/communities: **Russian** speaking churches (32), English (especially Ghanaian) and French (especially Congolese) speaking **African** churches (60), **Tamil** churches (23), some **Vietnamese** churches (9), a growing number of small Iranian groups and about 20 English-speaking Baptist churches of the “**International Baptist Convention**”². The latter, originating from the former American Baptist military churches, gather today a colourful international Christian folk in their midst and are as IBC-churches associate members of the German Baptist union.

The multi and monoethnic international churches on the list of the German Baptist Union have different forms of gatherings: Some come together as *groups of a local German Baptist Church*, some were adopted by the German church as *daughter churches*, some have become *self-sustaining member churches* of the Union, others choose *associate membership* which the Union offers especially in the case when both sides have to test whether the local ethnic church and the Union really fit together (in their rights and duties).

Today it is not only the mission secretary who has to work toward the integration of international and ethnic churches into the Union, but a whole task force group called “International Mission in Germany” (IMD) is devoted to this important work. Michael Kisskalt, as responsible mission secretary for the international churches, convenes this group which meets three times a year. The group consists of about 10 members of different regional and ethnic origins in order to regionalize and acculturate the integration work as much as possible.

The vision of IMD is the wandering people of God, men and women of all cultures and nations marching to Zion from

where the Kingdom of God is coming to us. In this journey, the international people of God are inviting all kinds of people to join them marching in the light of God.

In the light of this vision, IMD has three goals:

1. to encourage international churches in their mission work in Germany, among members of their ethnic group and among Germans;
2. to integrate the international churches into the Union;
3. to sensitize German churches and associations to the challenge of the international presence in Germany: we need to be good hosts.

Once a year the IMD, the leaders and pastors of the international churches and networks meet with the President or the General Secretary of the Union to be aware of each other and to discuss the present issues of interest and challenges on all sides.

Special challenges are, for example:

- The participation of international churches in regional and national structures of the BEFG;
- The legal *acceptance of pastors* of the international churches as ordained pastors of the Union. This problem is unresolved till today as many of these “pastors” can neither demonstrate the expected Baptist identity nor the necessary theological education;
- The *education of the pastors* and responsible co-workers of international churches. In the meantime, there are several small theological institutes (especially for Africans) of different denominational provenience. German Baptists are engaged in ecumenical efforts to coordinate these educational structures (and contents) in a better way;
- The struggles between leaders within certain ethnic groups which lead quite easily to divisions and even to the disappearance of ethnic churches;

- *Asylum issues*, especially the growing number of converted Iranians and the refusal of the German justice system to recognize religious reasons as sufficient for conceding the legal refugee status;³

- The second generation in monoethnic immigrant churches who run the risk of losing itself between the cultures.

During the national Conference of the BEFG in 2006, we tried to also attract representatives of international churches by offering a special program for them: a common lunch and Bible studies in French and English. The result was that more than 30 international leaders in our Union participated at the Conference.

All this work is done in great ecumenical openness, due to the fact that the identity of most of the monoethnic churches is more based on cultural understanding rather than on a Baptist identity. Congolese Churches are not only gathering Congolese Baptists but also Protestants of other denominations for example.

Thus, the German Baptists try to face the challenges of the many cultures and nations who are living in Germany. As a Union and as churches, we are engaged in national and regional efforts, in social work and in evangelism.

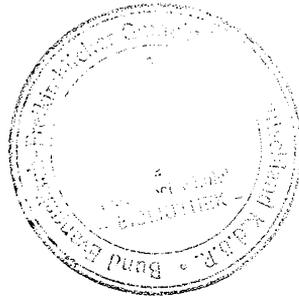
1 In 2005, there are only 4 small Turkish-speaking Christian communities in the German Baptist Union. In other denominations, there are not essentially more Turkish Christian communities.

2 See the report above by Jimmy Martin on "International and Multiethnic Churches".

3 The German Ministry of Justice provides two reasons for refusing asylum to Christian Iranians. First, they believe that Iranians who came to Germany for economic reasons convert consciously to the Christian faith calculating that by this step they can stay in Germany. Second, German judges say that Christians can live their Christian faith even in the Islamic Persian society when they don't live it out in a missionary way. Thus, there are ecumenical efforts (Commission "Human Rights and Religious Freedom") around the German juridical and political institutions to change the mindset which acts as if religion is not a public but only a private affair.

Ethnic Churches in Europe

A Baptist Response





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